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Online Law School Delisted

STATE BAR ACTION FOLLOWS COMPLAINTS

By Howard Mintz

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California regulators this week stripped Saratoga University School of Law of its status as a recognized law school as they sort through dozens of complaints against the owner.

After a hearing in which Saratoga's dean and owner, Michael Narkin, did not show up, the State Bar of California revoked the Internet correspondence school's registration in response to complaints from students who say they have been defrauded. Only students at schools registered with the bar can take the state exam to become lawyers.

The California Bureau of Private Postsecondary Vocational Education, which licenses schools such as Saratoga, has not yet taken official action, but considers the school "effectively" closed as a result of the bar's action, a spokeswoman said Thursday.

The bureau is reviewing 31 complaints against Narkin, who has been unreachable by regulators trying to find out what he's done with tuition money, as well as the students' grades and work material they need to get their law degrees.

The Mercury News reported last month that the state licensed Narkin to run a law school despite the fact he relinquished his law license nearly 20 years ago amid allegations he had defrauded clients and botched their cases.

Narkin in the summer sold the San Jose home listed as the address for the law school, and property records show he's established residence in Eugene, Ore. A message left at the phone number shown for that address was not returned Thursday. In August, Narkin told the Mercury News he planned to sell or close Saratoga, defended his running of the school and insisted he was trying to wrap up the students' final work as fast as he could.

But frustrated students say they can't get hold of Narkin. And Pamela Mares, the state bureau's spokeswoman, said investigators are still "trying to locate Mr. Narkin and the student records."

That creates a problem for students, who need transcripts of their work and grades if they want to transfer to another law school or take the bar exam. E.J. Bernacki, a bar spokesman, said students can still receive

credit for their work for Saratoga before it was ``deregistered" if they can provide the material.

California students may also be eligible for refunds from a state tuition recovery fund, but many of Saratoga's students, such as Claudia Keith of Ohio, signed up for the online school in other states. California is the only state in the nation that allows graduates of correspondence schools to take the bar exam.

Keith said Thursday she's going to try another correspondence school. ``I only pray it will not be a repeat," she said. ``I cannot waste another year of my life."

In the meantime, the Santa Clara County District Attorney's Office is also looking into about a half dozen complaints against Narkin. Deputy District Attorney Yen Dang said she is trying to work with the state bureau, but investigators need to determine if Narkin accepted tuition with an intent to commit fraud for a criminal probe to proceed.